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ABSTRACT

The combination of goals, concepts, generalizations, objectives, skills, attitudes, activities, teaching methods, and evaluation procedures into a long-term plan for dealing with a specific topic has generally been called a "unit plan." The child-centered approach to developing such a unit plan contains four stages; these are to (1) determine the needs of individual children, (2) construct broad objectives that would appear to meet the child's needs, (3) decide upon a topic that would appropriately incorporate the objectives, and (4) plan activities to meet the objectives. Three types of units are resource, teaching, and experience units. A resource unit is designed to serve as a reference for teachers who wish to cover a definite topic. A teaching unit, most often used in combination with a resource unit to allow for pupil planning and alternative activities, consists of lesson plans with specifications for objectives, materials, procedures, and evaluation methods. The experience unit differs from the other two in that no detailed preplanning is done. (Concluding sections of the document provide guidelines for developing both a unit plan and a lesson plan.) (RH)

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The Unit Approach in the Early Childhood Classroom

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The Unit Approach in the Early Childhood Classroom

The combining of goals, concepts, generalizations, objectives, skills, attitudes, activities, teaching methods, and evaluation procedures into a long term plan for dealing with a specific topic has generally been called a unit plan. With implementation of the Herbartian system during the latter half of the nineteenth century, lesson plans became highly organized. Johann Friedrick Herbart proposed five organizational steps for educational plans. These were preparation, presentation, association, generalization, and application. Remnants of these steps still exist today in lesson plans used with students from the nursery school to college level. Plans today begin with motivating children, procedures for instruction, providing relevance, and the culminating activity.

With the impact of the American Progressive Education movement, the lesson plan concept was extended to become more flexible, lengthy, and broader in scope. The organizational plan for providing educational experiences became the unit plan, very popular in science and social studies programs (Spodek, 1978). It is this unit approach that can, when appropriately used, be an essential asset to early childhood educators.

Traditionally, educators have mainly considered unit plans to be teaching units. The basic pattern for construction of the unit has been: (a) Determine the topic for study. (b) Select appropriate

objectives to be achieved with the topic. (c) Plan unit activities to accomplish the objectives (Nerbovig and Klausmeier, 1969). This plan can be appropriately used if a topic exists that would enrich the experiences of all children; and each child is developmentally prepared with the prerequisite skills and abilities to achieve the objectives. A teacher who has traveled extensively may wish to develop a unit on Mexico for her children. This is desirable and acceptable if she provides alternate objectives and activities covering the range of abilities and developmental levels within her class.

Child-centered Planning

It is possible to approach the use of unit plans in a more child-centered manner. When unit plans are constructed using this approach, the needs of individual children are the number one consideration. Close observation is used to determine: (1) areas in which individual children or groups of children need enrichment experiences, or (3) areas in which more advanced children should be given opportunities for further development. After these needs are determined, a topic is then chosen that provides occasion for meeting the children's needs.

A kindergarten teacher notices that five of the children in her class have very low level logical thinking skills. She is able to reach this conclusion from listing problem areas in dealing with material, such as; making only small groupings with a large group of trucks, not being able to place knives, forks, and plates into a group of eating utensils, knowing colors, but not making color groupings. From these problems, she determines that the children need experiences in dealing with material and the properties and characteristics of objects. These needs lead to a unit on classification, which begins with low level,

gross discrimination activities. However, with the addition of prerequisite skills through experience and maturation, the extended unit ends with multiple classification activities.

In summary, the child-centered approach to developing a unit plan contains four stages: (a) Determine the needs of individual children. (b) Construct broad objectives that would appear to meet the needs. (c) Decide upon a topic that would appropriately incorporate the objectives. (d) Plan activities to meet the objectives.

Types of Unit Plans

There are three types of unit plans; resource, teaching, and experience units. Varying in length from 1 to 8 weeks, or longer, each can be valuable in the educational setting (Nerbovig and Klausmeier, 1969). Many teachers find that children most enthusiastically respond to a combination of the three plans.

A resource unit is designed to serve as a reference for teachers who wish to cover a definite topic. It is usually planned by a group of teachers to contain a complete list of possibilities for using a given topic in the classroom. These plans are especially useful for administrators to have on file for use by teachers. A resource unit incorporates complete listings of broad concepts embodied within a topic, a wide range of references (books, films, addresses, resource people) and materials, and a variety of instructional techniques and evaluation procedures to be used with each concept for children of different abilities. A teacher who decides that her children's needs may be met by exposure to concepts found under a particular topic may go to the resource unit and choose teaching techniques and activities that are appropriate for her group of students. This provides the opportunity

for the individual teacher to use resources that time would not otherwise allow.

A teaching unit is prepared by one teacher for her classroom at a given time. It contains specific objectives obtained by assessing the needs of specific children. Activities and materials are planned especially to achieve the designated objectives. It is within a teaching unit that detailed lesson plans are found containing objectives, materials to be used, procedures to follow, and the evaluation method to determine if objectives are achieved. It is this type of unit that teachers use most often combined with a resource unit to allow for pupil planning and alternative activities.

The experience unit differs from the resource or teaching units in that no detailed preplanning is done. The curriculum web (Corwin, Hein, and Levin, 1976) approach is used allowing total cooperative planning between the child and the teacher. A child or a group of children may express an interest in a particular area of study. From this interest various members of the class initiate a variety of interdisciplinary activities creating a curriculum web.

A second grade teacher in an Appalachian region finds that several of her children are absent during the damp fall days of November. When the children return, she discovers that they have been "stripping" tobacco. Many of the children who live in town begin asking questions. From the discussion, various projects result; how tobacco is grown and made into cigarettes; plants that belong to the tobacco family; tobacco pests and diseases; using picture reference books; measuring plants; areas where tobacco and related plants can be grown, health and the use of tobacco; the effects of not growing tobacco on the families of

children within the classroom; money raising alternatives for those families who need money earned from tobacco growing.

If used by an informed, enthusiastic teacher, an experience unit is most effective in allowing children to actively and concretely experiment with their own ideas. As these ideas develop and are acted upon, a flow chart or log is used to record progress. The experience unit is also enhanced with the use of resource units. A facilitating teacher may rely upon alternative activities and resources to be used with those children who need guidance and suggestions to aid in the pursuit of individual interests.

Guide for the Development of a Unit Plan

The components of any unit plan are similar to the following:

1. The descriptive component consists of listings of specific learner needs such as age, developmental level, background and experiences and reasons for exposing students to the unit. It also contains the name of the topic, the approximate time required for implementation, and a general statement clarifying the purpose of the unit.

2. The second component contains the goals and objectives to be attained with the use of the unit. Broad goals may first be stated and subdivided into specific objectives. For many topics, especially those designed to develop logical thinking and motor skills, prerequisites must also be listed. Concept understanding, skill and attitude objectives can be written.

3. A content and activities guide comprises the largest component. Although content has been considered to be of major importance when working with older children, it can be highly valuable to those in the early childhood field. With the major emphasis upon quality of thinking

as formulated by Piaget, a wise teacher plans content which offers the optimal discrepancy, familiar content with only a degree of new material and experience (Phillips, 1975). A teacher can be aided in providing optimal learning experiences if a guide is used that integrates developmental theory and content. Activities are listed which directly relate to the content and needs of the learners. The activities are keyed to specific objectives. The activities are of three types: (a) introductory or motivational activities, to "get kids interested" (b) developmental, prerequisite or progressive learning activities, and (c) culminating activities.

4. The materials component consists of audio visual aids and concrete objects for use within the classroom. Resources are also listed such as reference persons, field trip locations, addresses for free materials, films and books. Special information necessary for the smooth operation of the unit is also found. An example of special information would be the procedure for bringing in guests and questions to use in guiding these visitors to provide information in a way that students will understand.

5. The final component found in the unit plan is the use of evaluation procedures. The most beneficial plan uses evaluation, not as a culminating activity, but as a teaching tool. A variety of methods are used to determine where students are at the beginning of the unit and to measure pupil progress.

Evaluation is a continuous process which is conducted directly, through observation or indirectly, through written work and other student products. An alert teacher writes comments about individual children and stores these with dated drawings, paintings and writings

in folders. Pictures may also be taken of three-dimensional constructions made by individuals. Finally, checklists are valuable tools for evaluation if they are specific and let the teacher know exactly what the child can do (Schickedanz, York, Stewart, and White, 1977). With the passing of time, the teacher can tell how each child is progressing by analyzing individual folders.

Developing a Lesson Plan

No discussion of the unit approach would be complete without some mention of lesson plan construction. Parallel to the unit plan, a lesson plan contains objectives, teaching procedures and an assessment program. All of these are developed after the needs of the learners are determined.

Objectives must be clear and specific and in most cases sequentially ordered. The major questions to ask when determining objectives are: "Are they appropriate and specific for the learners? Would another teacher be able to use them?"

Teaching procedures must be keyed to specific objectives, allowing alternative activities to meet objectives, using a variety of materials, and providing for individual differences. Varied learning styles and rates of learning should be provided for within the plan. A teacher who provides a variety of teaching procedures will often plan a large group activity, a small group activity, and an individual activity to accomplish the same objective.

Analogous to the procedures, the assessment program also contains a variety of methods, allowing children to demonstrate that objectives have been met in ways that are most appropriate to individual strengths.

An infinite number of topics can be drawn from the developmental and enrichment needs of young children. These topics include: transportation, communication, where we live, families, accepting feelings, how our bodies work, plants, animals and their babies, cooking, smells, interesting sounds, everyone has a name, all about me, me and my friends. With the growing emphasis placed upon the quality of children's thinking, units dealing with classification, relationships, comparisons, movement in space and understanding time relationships are essential. The possibilities for the use of a unit plan are limited only by the creativeness of the teacher and her willingness to be open to the ever expanding minds of children.

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